

# Meet the Speaker: An Interview with Ted O'Neill

**Ted O'Neill is a featured speaker for the International Conference this year. The following is an interview that he gave to *The English Connection*.**

**TEC:** Could you tell us a little about yourself and how you became involved in English language education?

**Ted O'Neill:** Both of my parents were teachers: my mom taught special education for most of her career, and my dad taught math for a few years, so naturally, I swore up and down that I would never ever become a teacher. But then, a year in Miyazaki Prefecture on the JET Program changed a few things. I returned to Boston and taught at a language school for a while, and eventually completed my MA in ESL Bilingual Education at UMASS/Boston, which helped me to get a job at Chukyo University in Nagoya, and I was on my way. I took a hiatus from teaching for a couple years in California, but when I returned to



institution. That seems to be where this year's theme, "Why are we here?" is directing us. And, I really like the emphasis on analogue in the digital era. I've always had a deep interest in technology – and computer technology in particular. I got steeped in it early when my dad would lug a giant terminal home from work. My first online connection was over a 110 baud modem as a kid, so if anyone is a part of that much-abused demographic idea the "digital native," it is me. So, I hope I can look through some of the edtech hype and bring us back to what is really important – the actual education.

I'm also really looking forward to the planned panel discussion on conferences, their role in our profession, and maybe even their future. Yes, I do think there is a very bright future for analogue conferences despite the steady increases in virtualization.

**TEC:** Of all the ELT-related activities that you are involved in, which of them provides you with the most satisfaction?

**O'Neill:** This is a tough one. Teaching a good class is always rewarding, but maybe recovering a class that went less well than planned is even better. In university-level ELT, I'm often an administrator, spokesperson, or test writer rather than a classroom

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teaching, this second half of my career was completely different because I became involved in professional development through JALT and other groups.

**TEC:** You will be doing a couple of presentations and will be part of a panel discussion on the future of face-to-face conferences. Can you tell us a little about them and how they will be useful to the EFL teacher?

**O'Neill:** Sometimes it is useful to step back and try to look at our work beyond the classroom or the

teacher or researcher. But, the bright side is that along with those duties comes time on campus and an office where students can find you. When one or two students drop by to discuss something, express some frustrations, or ask for help with an application for an internship or study-abroad program, that is great. That one-on-one interaction outside the curriculum with students can have long-lasting benefits for students and teachers.

**TEC:** What skills – teacher and/or learner skills – are

needed to best prepare our English language students for their future?

**O'Neill:** Being able to reflect on their goals in meaningful ways and act accordingly. It's a tall order for students and for teachers. The old, well-established pathways to a "good life" have been overgrown or washed away. The track from university to lifetime employment is no longer a reality for most students. They need to become adaptable.

**TEC:** Would you share with us a little about your life outside of ELT?



**O'Neill:** I've lived in the same apartment building in Tokyo since moving here in 2002. I just love living here and think it is one of the great cities of the world. I don't think I could really make a permanent home anywhere else. Food, art, design, people – we have it all. Tokyo is endlessly fascinating. On a day off, I will often leave the house in the morning with no particular place to go and just walk for hours through the city; I always discover something new and interesting on these urban hikes.

**TEC:** How do you plan to spend your time at KOTESOL 2017?

**O'Neill:** Talking with people. This will be only my

second visit to KOTESOL so there are still so many people here for me to meet and learn from. Of course, I will be attending presentations and workshops, but it is always informative to dig into them afterwards with the presenter or an audience member who is really fired up about the topic.

**TEC:** If you could change anything about ELT – in the classroom, outside the classroom, even ELT conferences – what would it be?

**O'Neill:** In my own context in Japan, I would eliminate the many English language requirements that students face. Research has shown that only a small number of Japanese adults actually need and use English language skills frequently. I recall how I chafed at certain requirements in school. And, we've all had the experience of teaching a group of students who absolutely do not want to be in the class – and didn't

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want to be in the previous year's class or the class before that. Combine these rules with otherwise laudable goals of fairness and equal treatment, and it isn't good for the students who don't want to be there (or the students who do really wish to learn the language but are plunged into a pool of classmates who do not). Make English elective at all levels of education, and make good other language options available such as Spanish, Korean, and Chinese, for example.

**TEC:** What else are you going to do here in Seoul?

**O'Neill:** Two years ago, I was able to add an extra day to my trip, so I visited the Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art near Itaewon. It really knocked me out. Their contemporary art collection has got everything, and the architecture is pretty amazing. But sadly, I had almost no Korean food other than a lunchbox last time. Plenty of good Italian and even some Mexican, so I didn't starve. This time, I plan to get some serious local eating done to keep me fueled up for the conference!